

## **Liberating Love: Learning Trust**

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

16th Sunday after Pentecost - September 23, 2020

Texts: Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

Exodus 16:2-15 The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.” Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.’” And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’”

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

Matthew 20:1-16 *Jesus has just told a rich young ruler that giving away his wealth would please God more than keeping the commandments. The man goes away sad, unable to comply. Jesus, too, is sad. He tells the disciples, “It’s easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich person to be saved.” “Then who can be saved?” they ask. “We’ve given up everything to follow you.” Jesus answers, “The last will be first and the first will be last.” Then he tells this story to illustrate his point:*

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Was this landowner fair or not? My gut says no. If you work longer and harder, you get more. There's something in me that rises up in protest at this story. Is this the justice Christians preach about? When I was a hospice chaplain, I noticed that my company was hiring home health aides for only a couple of dollars less than me. And I went, "What!? I have 14 years of specialized education post-high school, and 25 years of field experience, and I barely make more than a 22-year-old with a GED and a six-week CNA course? How does this even make sense? How is it fair?" So Bob reminded me, fair (fare) is what you pay to get on the bus. And I reminded myself, I'm not in this for the money. I set aside my gripe, at least for the moment.

Let's take a break from this frustrating gospel and return in time to Exodus. The Israelites are back at their favorite pastime, grumbling. Murmuring. Complaining. Here they are in the wilderness and that means no resources. No food. No water. All the freedom in the world doesn't mean much if you're starving. Better to be a slave whipped into submission, adding wealth to the wealthy, but with food on the table. Better to die in Egypt with full stomachs. Harsh, but slave mentality. Slave-mind had robbed them of the power to imagine any other way. It had stolen their ability to trust. They didn't trust Moses, and they didn't trust God. They didn't even trust the miracles of deliverance that brought them out of Egypt. God had to teach them another way.

The way was manna. It was called manna because when you say, "What is it?" in Hebrew, 'manhu,' that's kind of the sound you get. Literally daily bread, because it showed up every day but the seventh. All you had to do was pick it up off the ground. And whether you picked a lot or a little, it was enough. If you tried to save some for tomorrow, it just got wormy and smelly overnight. Except on Friday, when you had to pick extra and it didn't go bad. Then everyone got the seventh day off, the Sabbath, to worship, to rest, together as community.

You see what this means, don't you? No one could build up a surplus so no one could get rich. No one could use their wealth to control or oppress someone else. No one got into debt. Everyone was taken care of, and everyone was equal. God told Moses, this is a test. A trust test. Can you imagine

it? Every day you have to trust that food will be there again in the morning. Every sixth day, you have to trust that you would have enough for tomorrow. The trust test was not meant to trip them up or to weed out the weak or the whiners. God meant it to strengthen their trust that God's name was, "I AM YOUR GOD. I WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU." Do you remember how long it took to pass the test? 40 years in the wilderness. 40 years of daily bread. 40 years of Sabbath rest. 40 years of relying on God to wipe out 400 years of slave-mind.

African Americans claimed this Exodus story as their own. It became the basis of their trust in God, and the basis for their hope of freedom someday in the future - a hope that otherwise seemed hopeless. They claimed God's liberating love for themselves. Their trust was learned over generations, even when they were forbidden to read the Bible for themselves. What gave them the courage to persist in preaching freedom? What gave them the trust to sing, "My soul's been anchored in the Lord"? Maybe, too, you've heard the Civil Rights song called, "Oh, Freedom" - "And before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free." It takes a lot of trust to sing that way. I think what wiped out slave-mind for them was trust that the God of Israel was for them, too; they had God and they had one another. Life wasn't fair but they were on the freedom bus together. Joining their voices in song gave them the strength to remember and to trust.

Friends, what will it take for us to pass the trust test? The fear and distrust swirling about our world today are incredible, astonishing, bewildering. Unprecedented, some say. But suffering is hardly unprecedented. Maybe it's time we learned to trust from people who've had more practice at it. Can you imagine the freedom of really having your soul anchored in the Lord, not in your retirement account or your job or your college degrees or your inheritance? What would *you* risk so everyone could feel that freedom? It's so hard to remember that, body and soul, we are bound together. We belong to one another. And we belong to God. When one part of the body suffers, all suffer with it. The earth and all of us in it live or die, stand or fall, together.

Remember the aides and the wages that felt so unfair to me at first? It took me a while to recognize that they were the ones who got closest to the patients; they saw them most often and at their most helpless. The aides did things for people I wouldn't know how to do, or care to do. It was the aides who protected people's dignity when they couldn't clean or care for themselves. The aides who listened to their fears. Often, the aides prayed with them. The aides alerted me when people were struggling and needed an extra visit. They were my allies, my partners, my mentors. If fair were really fair, they should have made twice what I did. When all of us on the hospice team learned to trust and rely on each other, our patients got the best, most loving care.

God's justice is not what we call fairness. That's what's so hard for us to get. God's mercy is limitless: God doesn't limit who receives it. God doesn't limit how much we get. God never says, "You failed the test. Your mercy account is closed." I think the trust test works the other way: the more mercy we need, the more manna we need, the more we get, until we learn, really and truly, that we can trust this God, that God is for us, too. This God lived in Jesus, who led the misguided to truth, healed the hateful of the poison inside them, who ate and drank and rejoiced with the rejects. The

dropouts. The enslaved in body, and the enslaved in mind. He taught that “the last would be first and the first would be last.” He defied the principalities and powers of his day, not by breaking their force or their weapons but by allowing their “law and order” madness to break itself on him. In his living and in his dying, Jesus became the truth that all are welcome in the beloved community.

When will we figure out that we are all on this freedom bus together? That the more we learn to trust one another, to show mercy to each other, to accept all people as equally beloved by God, the better the ride will be. All it will cost to get on the freedom bus is giving up your own sense of self-importance, the arrogance of driving your own car wherever you feel like going, on your own. The fare is free, if you are willing. Jesus is on the bus. So is everyone you’ve ever admired for their lives of faith and dedication.\* So what are you waiting for? Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers - Judy Leal, special thanks for the cards and expressions of love and care that came to her on her birthday, while she was still in rehab - especially the four-foot-tall card from her family.

God of mercy, of abundance, of limitless love, come to us today in ways we can see and feel, hear and touch. Be present in ways that feed our bodies and nourish our souls. Alone, we are helpless; in you, with each other, we can do all the things that matter.

God of freedom, hear those who are bound up in sadness or despair, fear and loneliness, who call out to you to free them from their prisons. And hear those who don’t know how to call out, who are so enslaved to their own power and importance that they don’t know they are chained. Free us all, and bring us into a community where the gifts of all work for the good of all.

God of harvest, you bring the spring’s planting to completion, that your people may have daily bread. Inspire us to share what we have, so that no one goes hungry, especially during this pandemic. Extend your special protection over teachers and students, health care and other essential workers who are paid too little for the risks of their work;

Thank you for this beloved community and all the precious threads that connect us to others around the world: Strengthen those connections as we pray for those dear to us: for people suffering from the wildfires on the West Coast. Comfort those who mourn the death of loved ones and awaken us all to the joy of your promise, eternal life in you. In Jesus’ name and as he taught us, we pray...Our Father, who art in heaven,

\*I say this particularly in honor and memory of Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who died this week, striving for justice to her last breath. I would have put her in the sermon but I couldn’t say her name without weeping. Rest in power, RBG, and may we carry your work forward!